

**Department of Veterans Affairs Advisory Committee on Gulf War Veterans
Hamilton Crowne Plaza, 1001 14th Street, NW, Washington, D.C. 20005
Public Meeting June 17 – 19, 2008**

June 17, 2008

Present:

The Honorable Charlie Cragin, Committee Chair

Committee Members (alphabetical order):

Martha Douthitt

Dr. Henry Falk

Mark Garner

Dr. John Hart

Rusty Jones

Kirt Love

Dan Ortiz

Dan Pinedo

LTG (USAR, RET) Tom Plewes

Valerie Randall

Randy Reese

Steve Robertson

Not Present:

Dr. Lynn Goldman

Introduction of Secretary James B. Peake, M.D. by Chairman Charlie Cragin

Opening Remarks of Secretary James B. Peake, M.D.

Secretary Peake welcomed and thanked the members for their service both on the committee and in their lives as citizens, veterans or veteran advocates. The Secretary discussed the importance the Department places on the unique issues and challenges faced by Gulf War veterans. He explained that the Gulf War Research Advisory Committee (RAC), established in 2002, is different from this committee. The RAC was formed to work with researchers to ensure VA is pursuing issues from a research perspective. He deliberately established the Gulf War Advisory Committee to solely look at benefits and services for this cohort.

The Secretary discussed the significance of having a balanced committee make-up. The members have different interests, view points, experiences and backgrounds from the reserve component to people on the ground, to those who had loved ones on the ground. He went on to say while some believe this cohort is wrapped into the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT), there is a different set of issues and concerns for this cohort of veterans that is relevant to the Committee. Secretary Peake said he looked forward to hearing back from the committee as it deliberates and thinks through the issues that VA should be considering as a quality organization that meet the Department's responsibilities for serving the veterans of this particular era.

The Secretary also encouraged the Committee to take advantage of the Department's representatives who were scheduled to give overviews of VA over the next couple of days, in order for the members to better understand the complex organization that is the VA. He expressed his open door policy to the Chairman if the committee needs him. He reminded the committee of the charter's sunset clause of 18 months but told them it can be extended if necessary.

Comments from Chairman Charlie Cragin

Chairman Cragin began by recapping for the public that early in the day, the committee completed ethics training, administrative paperwork, and introductions. He then gave an overview of the expectation of the meeting. The first two days were designed to allow the Committee to receive "VA 101" from the senior leadership of the Department of Veterans Affairs in order to get a baseline of the organization. The last day is reserved for Committee discussions and the way ahead for the next 18 months. The committee should discuss the structure of the committee for the purpose of logistics, whether there should be subcommittees, either by areas of investigation or geography. This Committee will be examining benefits and services being provided to Gulf War veterans and will want to hear from affected veterans and their caregivers. The Committee would also like to hear from veterans who avoid the VA to make an assessment as to why and if there are areas for improvement that would enable those veterans to return to or seek out the Department. These assessments require factual evaluation and analysis as the committee moves forward. First, the committee must educate itself to reach a plateau where it believes it has assembled enough facts necessary to collaboratively deliberate and develop recommendations. This will be an on-going process which will require not only attending meetings, but also completing personal research so when the committee meets, it is not starting at square one but rather moving forward in the personal educational process.

The Chairman asked that the committee not confuse expectations by trying to anticipate where the committee is going, but to assemble the facts. There are veterans who are very much interested in the committee's actions and deliberations. As the committee has information to disseminate, ensure it is disseminated by the committee and not expressed as the opinions of individuals. The Gulf War Advisory Committee website will be a communication mechanism, operate as an outreach platform, and seek and receive input from veterans, family members, and clinicians.

The Chairman also established protocols for media inquires. The Office of Policy and Planning, Public Affairs, or the Chairman will speak on behalf of the Committee. Each member is encouraged when talking with the media to emphasize they are speaking as an individual member and not on behalf of the committee.

Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Presentation

Dr. Lawrence R. Deyton, M.S.P.H., M.D.

Chief Public Health and Environmental Hazards Office

Dr. Deyton presented an overview of the VHA. He explained VHA's medical care for enrolled veterans as well as VA's special focus on conditions related to military service. Dr. Deyton also introduced the Committee to VA's newest programs which include My Health eVet, the Internet-based, secure Personal Health Record. Dr. Deyton also specifically discussed the services available for Gulf War veterans to include the Gulf War Registry, the Special Depleted Uranium Program, the War Related Illness and Injury Study Centers, as well as Outreach activities like the Gulf War Review, Veterans Health Initiative (VHI) Independent Study Guides, and Research.

Dr. Deyton's slide presentation is attached.

National Cemetery Administration (NCA)

The Honorable William Tuerk

Under Secretary, Memorial Affairs

Mr. Tuerk gave an overview of the NCA by explaining the organization's responsibilities, veteran's benefits, and eligibility requirements. By service area, he depicted projected veteran deaths of those who would be eligible for burial benefits. He also discussed VA's strategies to meet the burial needs of veterans.

Mr. Tuerk's slide presentation is attached.

June 18, 2008

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Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA)

Mr. Keith Pedigo

Associate Deputy Under Secretary

Mr. Pedigo opened the morning discussions with an overview of VBA's benefits programs which include Compensation and Pension, Education, Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment, Loan Guaranty, and Insurance. He presented percentages of veterans receiving compensation by period of service. He said Gulf War era veterans make up 27 percent of veterans currently receiving compensation. Mr. Pedigo discussed the timeline for processing claims and factors which have impacted the growth of claims; some of which include the aging veteran population, the Benefits Delivery at Discharge Program, and improved and expanded outreach. Mr. Pedigo also gave a summary of the proposed education bill which would provide educational assistance to service members serving on active duty on or after September 11, 2001.

Mr. Pedigo's slide presentation is attached.

The Board of Veterans' Appeals

The Honorable James P. Terry

Chairman

Mr. Terry addressed the Committee on the mission of the Board of Veterans' Appeals. He discussed the number of decisions made over the past two fiscal years to the present. He also talked about the Board's commitment to making timely decisions on appeals and importance of completing Travel Board trips. Mr. Terry then mentioned the impact of evolving studies and research related to undiagnosed illnesses in Gulf War veterans.

Office of Research & Development

Dr. Joel Kupersmith, M.D.

Chief, Research & Development Officer

Dr. Kupersmith first discussed the overall mission and history of the Office of Research and Development and important recent VA research advances. He then discussed the Gulf War Veterans Illness Research Program. He said that more than 30 percent of veterans who served during the Gulf War between 1990 – 1991 have service-connected conditions and about 3,300 have been categorized as “undiagnosed illness.” Reports of the federally sponsored research on Gulf War Veterans Illness are produced by the Research Subcommittee of the Interagency Deployment Working Group and submitted to Congress annually.

Dr. Kupersmith’s slide presentation is attached.

Veterans Affairs Central Office Library

Caryl Kazen

Director, VA Central Library

Caryl Kazen explained the literature support the Library can give the Committee. The Library’s expansive network of resources enables it to conduct very comprehensive literature searches and provide the committee with the most current information related to Gulf War issues.

Caryl Kazen’s slide presentation is attached.

Public Comment Period

Public comments were heard from the following:

- Ms. Venus V. Hammack, Gulf War Veteran and Vietnam era, former member of the Army Nurses Corps. She represented the Persian Gulf War Era Veterans Association.
- Mr. Donald Overton, 82nd Airborne, Gulf War Veteran who was blinded during the War. He represented Veterans of Modern Warfare.
- Mr. Chuck Smith, Washington, D.C. Chapter of the Veterans of Foreign Wars
- Mr. Michael Lanning, Gulf War Veteran, medically retired from the Air Force
- Denise Nichols, RN Maj. USAFR (Ret.) Coalition Vice Chairman & Chairman – Gulf War Illness Committee, National Vietnam & Gulf War Veterans Coalition

Closing Remarks from Deputy Assistant Secretary, Mark Gorenflo

Mark Gorenflo said the committee has heard the overview from the VA staff. The last day of the meeting should be focused on what kinds of issues the Committee wants to investigate in order to accomplish its mission and hopefully provide recommendations to the Secretary in the 18 months set forth.

Closing Remarks from Chairman Charlie Cragin

The Chairman commented that much of the presentations was very general. He expressed that the committee would have benefited more from presentations centered on Gulf War issues. He expects the committee will need to get more education on the issues as it moves forward to make recommendations to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs.

June 19, 2008

Attendees:

The Honorable Charlie Cragin, Committee Chair

Committee Members (alphabetical order):

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Dr. Henry Falk

Mark Garner

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Dan Ortiz

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Valerie Randall

Randy Reese

Steve Robertson

Not Present:

Dr. Lynn Goldman

Rusty Jones

Committee Discussion Time

The Committee heard each member present their individual perspectives of recommendations on the content for the 18 month life of the committee.

The following summarizes recommendations from the Committee members:

- The Committee should consider having meetings where the veterans live. In each destination city, the committee should visit at least one VA Regional Office, one VA Medical Center, and as many other VA facilities as available in the city.
- Website Development
 - o A space where people can ask questions
 - o Include polls/surveys
 - o Website can act as committee's "15th committee member"
 - o Source where people can contact doctors and others to help them process their claims
 - o Include information about the next meeting and when the website will be updated next
 - o Downloadable
 - o Map that pin points soldiers duty station while in Gulf War for data tracking
 - o Make the site user-friendly
- Committee should be knowledgeable and review all legislation existing (especially things with sunset provisions).
- Review existing vocabulary and definitions relating to the Gulf War and make sure they do not need updating/correcting.
- Administration needs to make sure current mailing addresses are correct for Gulf War veterans.

- Explore expanding outreach activities.
- Review current treatment protocol for Gulf War veterans.
- Review the benefits claims process and identify challenges.
- Investigate whether previously denied claims were reviewed after legislation changed.
- Talk to clinicians of Gulf War veterans to find out where most of them are living. Find out how these doctors are trained to care for these vets.
- All meetings should be open and we should advertise them so the public knows and can attend.
- The best way for the committee to communicate currently will be through email.
- Spouses/families/dependents are very important to focus on for the committee.
- Wants more details from research development in order to learn more background.
- Focus on long-term research efforts.
- Focus on female veterans who served in conflict; are they aware of their benefits (specifically health care) and determine the rate at which female veterans' claims are being approved.
- The Committee should consider a chapter in its final report to be emerging issues of delayed illnesses (such as brain cancer, Multiple Sclerosis, memory loss, teeth/eye problems).
- Find out why people are not in the registry.
- Determine how many Gulf War veterans have applied/been denied/granted benefits.
- Give a status as to where VA is medically with benefits as of 2008.
- Revise data sets to bring us up to speed.
- A Mobile Clinic could be created to reach veterans; probably would need to be congressionally mandated. Utilize these screening clinics (RVs, buses) from town to town in store parking lots, etc.
- Take a look at the term: Undiagnosed illness. What does it really mean?
- Need to establish a framework for down the road, and more importantly outcomes.
- Explore how to educate widows of this war. Spouses need to participate and have a voice.

The Committee decided that the next meeting will be September 24 – 25, 2008 in Washington, D.C. so members can participate in more granular discussions related to Gulf War veterans.

Public Comments

The Committee received comments from:

- Dr. James N. Baraniuk, M.D. Georgetown University Medical Center gave a presentation on CNPD1 Polymorphisms and Carnosine Treatment in Gulf War Illnesses.
- Mr. Claridge Rice represented the average veteran in Eastern North Carolina.
- Denise Nichols, RN Maj. USAFR (Ret.) Coalition Vice Chairman & Chairman – Gulf War Illness Committee, National Vietnam & Gulf War Veterans Coalition

Closing Remarks were given by Chairman Cragin